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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: OMAN ONLINE: SEEKING JOBS AND DEFENDING ARRESTEES

1. Summary: The Omani Internet chat rooms "al-Sablah" and "al-Majarra" are the liveliest and most comprehensive Arabic-language fora for political and social discourse in the country, touching on issues and personalities rarely addressed in the conventional media. While not totally free, nor wholly reflective of Omani public opinion, these popular sites nevertheless offer a worthwhile window into the hot topics and unvarnished views of the day. This edition of Oman Online contains the following topics:

-- Privatizing the electric company
-- Arrestees seek legal representation

End summary.

Privatization Hurts Some

2. An al-Sablah subscriber introduced a discussion on the Omani government's decision to privatize electricity. He wrote, "I am sure there are noble goals behind the royal decree that called for the privatization of the Ministry of Electricity (MOE). However, the results are the opposite." He continued, "Some say privatization will increase job opportunities for Omanis in the private sector, allow for greater competition, and reduce the administrative and budgetary burden on the government. However, that is not what is happening. Many Omani employees of the MOE are being displaced or fired outright. They are not being absorbed by private electric companies." Another al-Sablah participant speculated, "The government had hoped to move the MOE employees into the Ministry of Housing, but this proved impractical." Another subscriber stated, "The government is simply trying to reduce its own financial burden by shifting it to the backs of the people."

Detainees Have Rights

3. Al-Sablah members continue to discuss the recent arrests of persons suspected of belonging to "an illegal organization." Many participants called upon the government to allow the families and friends of the detainees to visit them. One member stated, "I heard that the Attorney General refused to allow the detainees to meet with their families. This is unfair." Another subscriber commented, "The detainees are Omanis, and they deserve to be treated fairly. They are entitled to legal representation and they must receive treatment that meets human rights standards." Another member wrote, "I understand the families are seeking legal representation for the detainees, but they cannot afford the outrageous 3000 Omani riyal (ca. USD 7770) retainers that lawyers are demanding."

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